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ABSTRACT

The relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement of at-risk adolescent black males was studied for 42 students in grades 6, 7, and 8. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) was used to provide global measures of self-esteem. School grades and scores from the Stanford Achievement Test battery were used to measure academic achievement. The SEI was found to be a reliable measure of global self-esteem for these at-risk adolescents. Moderate to strong internal consistency measures were found for three of the four SEI subscales. The overall average self-esteem score for these subjects was significantly lower than for most means reported in normative studies for the SEI, but not significantly lower than means reported in studies of rural ninth graders, high school black males, and blacks in grades 3 through 8. Self-esteem was significantly related to standardized test battery composite score and end-of-year school grade average. SEI was also significantly related to grades in English and social studies, but not mathematics and science. Findings suggest that overall self-esteem might be enhanced by increasing school performance in specific academic content areas. One table presents correlations for self-esteem and academic achievement. (SLD)

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SELF-ESTEEM AND ACHIEVEMENT OF AT-RISK ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES

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Self-esteem and Achievement for At-risk Adolescent Black Males

Concerned black men in a rural, southern community developed a special program for at-risk black males (Cobbs & McCallum, 1992). Teachers were asked to identify at-risk participants in kindergarten through grade eight for the program based on several characteristics (Cobbs, 1992). Two of these characteristics were low self-esteem and poor academic performance. The focus of this study was to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement of the middle school students identified at-risk by the teachers.

Sewell (1985) noted there is little empirical evidence to show a relationship between school performance and self-esteem. More recently, Gaspard and Burnett (1991) observed a moderate relationship (r=.38) between self-esteem and grade average for rural ninth-grade students. However, Mboya (1986) found no significant relationship between self-esteem and standardized achievement test scores for tenth-grade black males. Similarly, Demo and Parker (1987) found no significant relationship between self-esteem and grade average for college-age black males. Kagan (1988) suggested further investigation is needed to examine the relationship between self-esteem and achievement in specific content areas.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to measure the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement of at-risk adolescent black males. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) was used to provide global measures of self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). School grades and scores from the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) battery were used to measure academic achievement.

Method

In one sitting, the school counselor administered the Coopersmith SEI to 42 at-risk black males in grades 6, 7, and 8. The SEI consists of 58 items providing a measure of global self-esteem ranging from zero to 100. Participants were requested to indicate "like me" or "unlike me" on an answer sheet, while being instructed that there was no right or wrong answer to each question. Prior to administering the SEI, release forms had been obtained from participants, parents and school officials. The SEI yields a global measure of self-esteem and four sub-scales: general self, social self-peers, home-parents, and school-academic. SEI has been a popular research tool in assessing self-esteem and self-concept, appearing in 942 articles over the past 25 years (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). In two reviews by the Buros Institute of Mental Measurements, SEI was recommended as an instrument appropriate for research (Peterson & Austin, 1985) and was noted for its wide applicability for research purposes (Sewell, 1985). The SEI is purported to be a reliable and stable instrument (Peterson & Austin, 1985; Sewell, 1985) with internal consistency reliability ranging from r=.87 to r=.92 for grades four to eight (Coopersmith, 1981). Using an adapted SEI scale, Zirkel and Gable (1977) reported test-retest reliability of r=.86 for blacks.

For all students in grades 6, 7, and 8, SAT scores for the same year were recorded from school records in reading, language, mathematics, science, social studies

and battery composite. These SAT scores were converted to a common standard score distribution to reflect each student's relative standing in his class.

School records yielded student grades in English, mathematics, science and social studies for the school year. These grades were averaged to produce a grade average.

Results

Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI)

Applying coefficient alpha, item responses of the SEI for the 42 at-risk adolescent black males yielded an internal consistency reliability coefficient of r=.793. This reliability estimate of global self-esteem was somewhat lower than the measures reported by Coopersmith (1981) and Zirkel and Gable (1977). The reliability coefficients of the SEI sub-scales were: general self (r=.678), social self-peers (r=.436), home-parents (r=.164), and school-academic (r=.458). These findings support Zirkel and Gable's (1977) use of a modified SEI scale which omitted the home-parents sub-scale from the SEI global measure of self-esteem.

The SEI scores for the entire sample ranged from 38 to 96 with a mean of 63.0 and standard deviation of 12.75. Compared with normative data reported in the Coopersmith (1981) manual, this mean of 63.0 is similar to the mean value of 64.6 for a sample of 60 black children in grades three to eight, but lower than the mean of 73.6 for 681 black children aged eight to fourteen. The manual reported SEI means generally ranged from 70 to 80 with standard deviations of 11 to 13. By comparison, most of the students in this study had lower self-esteem than the reference groups reported in the Coopersmith manual. For the distribution of scores in the present study, SEI scores at the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles were 54.3, 61.0 and 72.3, respectively.

Academic Achievement

Stanford Achievement Test (SAT). Students' overall and content area SAT scores were converted to standard scores representing their relative standing in their classes. These converted scores were determined by obtaining the overall and content area SAT means and standard deviations for all middle school students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Next, the scores of the at-risk students were converted to score distributions having a mean of 500 and standard deviation of 100. The re-normed SAT scores for the at-risk black males had averages of: battery composite, 422 (s=105); reading, 421 (s=108); language, 433 (s=100); mathematics, 433 (s=91); science, 446 (s=105); and social studies, 426 (s=102). In summary, the average SAT scores for these at-risk black males generally fell .5 to .8 standard deviations below the mean of their middle school classes.

Grade Averages. End of school grades in English, mathematics, science and social studies for the at-risk black males averaged 1.85 (s=.69) on a four-point scale (4=A, 3=B, 2=C, 1=D, 0=F). Overall, these students had lower grades in science (GPA=1.58) than in social studies (GPA=2.03), English (GPA=2.02) and mathematics (GPA=1.90). Accumulating all of the subjects' grades across all four courses produced 3.1% A's, 21.4% B's, 39.0% C's, 30.8% D's, and 5.7% F's.

Relationship Between SAT Scores and School Grades. Unless indicated otherwise, all correlations reported in this study are significant at the .05 level of significance. The overall grade average correlated r=.679 with the SAT battery average. The correlations between grades and SAT scores in the four content areas were: English, r=.380; mathematics, r=.447; science, r=.646; social studies, r=.446.

Relationships Between Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

SEI and SAT. As shown in Table 1, the SEI global measure of self-esteem was significantly related to the SAT battery composite (r=.290), to SAT mathematics (r=.308), and to SAT science (r=.382). For the SEI sub-scale general self, only one significant relationship was observed, to SAT science (r=.298). No significant relationships were identified between the SEI sub-scale social self-peers and SAT scores. The SEI sub-scale home-parents was significantly related to the SAT measures for battery composite, reading, language, mathematics and science. For the SEI sub-scale school-academic, significant relationships were found with the SAT battery composite, reading, language and science scores. Of the five SEI measures (global and four sub-scales), four were significantly correlated with SAT science, three with the SAT battery composite, two with SAT reading, SAT language and SAT mathematics, and none with SAT social studies.

SEI and School Grades. As shown on the lower portion of Table 1, the SEI global measure of self-esteem was significantly related to the average school grades (r=.426), English grades (r=.309), and social studies grades (r=.334). The SEI sub-scale general self was significantly correlated with average school grades and social studies grades. The SEI sub-scale social self-peers was significantly related to average school grades, English grades, mathematics grades and science grades. The SEI sub-scale home-parents was significantly related to average school grades and science grades. The SEI sub-scale school-academic was significantly related only to English grades. Overall, of the five SEI measures, four significant relationships were found with average school grades, three with English grades, two with science grades and social studies grades, and one with mathematics grades.

Discussion

In this study the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) was found to be a reliable measure of global self-esteem for at-risk adolescent black males. Moderate to strong internal consistency measures were found for three of the four SEI sub-scales: general self, social self-peers, and school-academic.

The overall average self-esteem score for the at-risk middle school black males was significantly lower than most means reported in the normative studies in the Coopersmith (1981) manual. However, the average self-esteem score obtained in the present study was not significantly lower than means reported in studies for rural ninth graders (Gaspard & Burnett, 1991), for high school black males (Terrell, Terrell & Taylor, 1988), and for blacks in grades three to eight (Coopersmith, 1981).

Sewell (1985) indicated there was little empirical evidence showing significant relationships between school performance and self-esteem. In this investigation, the SEI global measure of self-esteem was significantly related to two composite measures of school performance: standardized test battery composite score and end-of-year

school grade average. Overall, of the 50 correlations tested between self-esteem and measures of school performance, 23 were found to be significant positive relationships. However, only four pairs were found to be in common across both measures of school performance. Comparable significant relationships with overall school performance were noted only for the SEI home-parent sub-scale. Significant relationships for both SAT scores and school grades were noted in the SEI home-parent sub-scale with science. In the SEI school-academic sub-scale, both SAT reading and SAT language correlated with English grades.

Significant relationships with self-esteem were noted for the four school performance areas investigated. The SEI global measure of self-esteem was significantly related to SAT scores in mathematics and science, but not in reading, language and social studies. Conversely, SEI was significantly related to school grades in English and social studies, but not in mathematics and science.

These findings suggest overall self-esteem might be enhanced by increasing school performance in specific content areas. As previously recommended in reviews of SEI (Peterson & Austin, 1985; Sewell, 1985), measures of self-esteem are useful for research and group interpretation. However, SEI measures of self-esteem have limited utility in interpreting an individual's self-esteem. Thus, it is recommended the most appropriate application of these findings should be directed at the program working with at-risk black males. Continued efforts to boost self-esteem may serve to enhance academic performance; continued efforts to improve academic performance may increase their self-esteem.

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Table 1

Correlations of Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement
for 42 At-risk Adolescent Black Males

Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) and Stanford Achievement Test (SAT)

SAT Score	SEI Total	General Self	Social Self-Peers	Home-Parents	School-Academic
Battery Composite	.290*	.182	.130	.325*	.381*
Reading	.252	.130	.061	.284*	.458*
Language	.236	.125	.052	.299*	.399*
Mathematics	.308*	.242	.229	.279*	.241
Science	.382*	.298*	.228	.358*	.359*
Social Studies	.189	.156	.014	.216	.232

Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) and School Grades

School Grades	SEI Total	General Self	Social Self-Peers	Home-Parents	School-Academic
Overall Average	.426*	.307*	.482*	.315*	.200
English	.309*	.187	.401*	.123	.269*
Mathematics	.190	.161	.485*	.072	-.085
Science	.233	.006	.394*	.286*	.229
Social Studies	.334*	.268*	.231	.230	.266

* $p < .05$